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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance

Participation of volunteers, "White Helmets", in the activities of the United Nations in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report describes the status of implementation of the "White Helmets" initiative in the activities of the United Nations system in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development. The report provides highlights and updates on the activities undertaken by the White Helmets since the last report, dated 21 August 2001 (A/56/308), and recommends to the United Nations system the value of utilizing preidentified, standby and trained teams of volunteers in system-wide activities. The report further welcomes the involvement of additional Member States in the White Helmets initiative so that specially trained volunteers can enhance emergency response and development efforts.

* A/58/150.
** The present report is being submitted on 27 August 2003 so as to include updated information.

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly, in its resolutions 49/139 B, 50/19, 52/171, 54/98 and 56/102, called on the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), a programme administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), together with the entire United Nations system, to encourage the use of the expertise available through the "White Helmets" initiative. That initiative was established by the Government of Argentina with the aim of promoting the concept of preidentified, standby and trained teams of volunteers from various national volunteer corps that could be placed at the disposal of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in support of immediate relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development activities.

2. The present report covers the period from March 2001 to July 2003. It provides an overview of further progress made in collaboration with different partners, in particular with the Government of Argentina, through the White Helmets Commission of Argentina.

3. The report describes highlights of programme activities and their results, existing mechanisms and partnerships, financing and resources mobilization, and underscores opportunities for widening the operationalization of the concept. The joint initiative and the subsequent United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets programme were highly appreciated by many parties. Member States, United Nations country offices and many individuals and organizations consulted considered the programme relevant as a mechanism in support of humanitarian activities.

4. Within the framework envisaged in the General Assembly resolutions, the Government of Argentina, through the White Helmets Commission, continues to actively support the expansion of the programme, in collaboration with the United Nations Volunteers. The United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission partnership is an example of how the White Helmets concept and modality can be applied successfully. While most activities were carried out through this partnership, other countries have designated focal points through which a widening of the initiative can be explored and pursued.

II. Highlights of programme activities

5. It should be noted that, despite the recent political and economic situation which Argentina has experienced, the Government of Argentina maintains its permanent commitment to the White Helmets initiative as the primary contributor to the United Nations Volunteers programme.

6. Since the last report (A/56/308), the following activities, among others, have been undertaken in the context of the United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission partnership:

(a) In response to a request made by the Government of the Czech Republic, three White Helmets volunteers were fielded to assist with the recovery efforts of disaster-impacted agricultural lands that were seriously affected by the mid-2002 floods;

(b) Within the framework of the United Nations Development Programme preparedness and contingency plan related to the eventual situation in Iraq and

Middle East countries, White Helmets was requested to supply pre-selected teams specialized in "complex situation" assistance, according to the terms of reference designed and sent by the United Nations Development Programme. In permanent contact with the United Nations Volunteers, selection activities were carried out and the team of standby volunteers was submitted to the United Nations Volunteers and made available to the United Nations system;

(c) In view of the success of the White Helmets sports projects in Lebanon and Kosovo that United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets initiated in July 2002, a second programme was undertaken in collaboration with the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo to support sports development in Kosovo. The United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets helped to develop programmes for training, coaching and social sports activities. Information on this project was shared with the Special Assistant of the Secretary-General on sport for development and peace;

(d) At the request of the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, three White Helmets volunteers were sent to Fiji as observers during the national elections held in 2001. The volunteers carried out the registration, control and supervision of voters in different regions of the country and were present throughout the exercise;

(e) Having agreed on the importance of strengthening and properly coordinating a regional humanitarian aid action plan with other members of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) countries in 2000, the White Helmets Commission organized a workshop seminar on the subject in August 2001. Delegations from Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia and Chile took part in the seminar's activities and covered such areas as attention to psychological and traumatic effects of disasters, coordination of focal points, surveying of structures and logistics coordination in disaster-affected areas. The creation of specialized rapid response emergency assistance teams throughout the region is one of the expected outcomes of the action plan. Representatives of the United Nations system, Organization of American States agencies in Buenos Aires, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Argentine Foreign Office and Armed Forces officials, and the Chief of the United Nations Volunteers Humanitarian Relief Unit in Geneva were all present;

(f) As a consequence of the earthquake that hit the Gujarat province in February 2001 and at the request of the Government of India, three White Helmets volunteers were fielded to collaborate in the surveying, planning and reconstruction activities of the area, as well as to develop a prevention-based project;

(g) After the earthquake of January 2001 in El Salvador, a team of White Helmets volunteers assisted in the reconstruction of shelters and housing.

7. As can be observed from the following examples, assistance to countries provided by the White Helmets directly or through an agency or programme of the United Nations system or regional organizations continues to demonstrate the potential success of fielding preidentified, standby and trained teams of volunteers:

(a) Following the landslide that affected Bolivia in late March 2003 and in coordination with the United Nations Development Programme, four White Helmets

volunteers were fielded to assist with emergency supply management and provision of mental health and trauma support to the victims;

(b) A sustainable teaching and educational programme was launched and implemented by four White Helmets volunteers in 2002 in the department of Jinotega, Nicaragua. The project was later extended on the request of local authorities;

(c) A large number of White Helmets volunteers with expertise in hydrology implemented an emergency and flood control pilot programme for the city of Durazno, Uruguay. It resulted in the creation of emergency plans and the establishment of an effective flood control system in the affected area. This project was implemented in collaboration with the national hydrographic direction of Uruguay;

(d) Four White Helmets volunteers trained local departmental volunteers in Uruguay to help in the relief of natural or man-made emergencies, and created a volunteer and NGO database to support the national emergency system and the various departmental emergency committees in that country;

(e) As requested by the Governments of El Salvador and Guatemala, 14 White Helmets volunteers were fielded and developed a participative hazard management programme for the population of the Bi-National River Paz Valley. This project includes natural disaster emergency assistance and training for the local population;

(f) A complete educational basis and system for aboriginal groups living in the Bosawás Reserve in Nicaragua is being developed by a group of White Helmets volunteers. With United States Government and Organization of American States financial support, this project is developing local human resources by supervising and training local teachers;

(g) Pursuant to a previous preidentification mission, a project was carried out to restore and improve the production capacity of the livestock and agriculture sector in Nicaragua, which was seriously affected by hurricane Mitch. In view of the success of the first phase during 2001-2002, a second mission was requested by local authorities and was implemented in 2003;

(h) A health and nutritional control programme in educational facilities is being carried out by 12 White Helmets volunteers in the aboriginal area of Ngobe Bugle, Panama. This mission aims to develop a complete training programme for the local population on health-related issues;

(i) Responding to a request made by local authorities in Argentina, 28 White Helmets volunteers collaborated for two months in the control, classification and organization of medical donations arriving from abroad in mid-2002.

III. Existing mechanisms and partnerships

8. All United Nations Volunteers and White Helmets Commission activities continued to be implemented within the framework of humanitarian assistance and development programmes of the United Nations agencies, directly responding to requests from host Governments or United Nations system agencies.

9. During the reporting period, activities were undertaken in collaboration with such United Nations agencies as the United Nations Development Programme, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme, United Nations peacekeeping operations and national institutions in the beneficiary countries.

10. As stated in the last report of the Secretary-General, the operationalization of the White Helmets concept and the experience gained with such operationalization was noted in the White Helmets Commission cooperation review of 1999. The review indicated that the White Helmets concept could be translated into a valuable assistance modality through further expansion of the initiative's concept by replicating it with other multilateral funding institutions, national volunteer corps, civil society and other relevant entities.

IV. Financing and resources mobilization

11. The Special Volunteer Fund of the United Nations Volunteers was endorsed and established by the General Assembly in its resolution 49/139 B.

12. A number of other Member States have expressed interest in supporting the special financing window through cash or in kind contributions. The Government of Argentina, however, continues to be the primary contributor to the United Nations Volunteers special financing window. It is hoped that other Member States will be further encouraged to contribute in the near future.

13. A regional technical cooperation (non-reimbursable) agreement was signed between the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Development Bank in July 1999. The agreement stipulated financing for the execution of operations of White Helmets volunteer operations within the continent. Through this agreement, the Inter-American Development Bank resolved to make a non-reimbursable contribution of $750,000 or its equivalent in any convertible currency for the implementation of operations. This special fund administered by the Organization of American States is open to contributions from all Member States and has financed a large number of humanitarian actions mentioned in the present report, including the rehabilitation, development and disaster-prevention missions in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama and Uruguay mentioned in paragraph 7 above.

14. Further to the successful development of the special fund, a recent contribution of US$ 500,000 was made by the United States Government to a human resources development project in the Bosawás Reserve, Nicaragua.

V. Concluding observations

15. The concept of preidentified, standby and trained teams of volunteers as embodied in the White Helmets approach is seen as a valuable modality made available to the United Nations Volunteers programme, in support of immediate relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development activities. Observations made concerning the joint programming of activities conducted by the United Nations Volunteers and the White Helmets Commission indicate that an increasing number

of Member States are willing to consider the creation and strengthening of their volunteer capacities in support of the White Helmets initiative.

16. Taking into account General Assembly resolution 56/102, the Government of Argentina ratified its support to the White Helmets initiative and in July 2003 designated a new President and Board members for the Commission.

17. It is hoped that additional financial contributions to the special financing window of United Nations Volunteers can be mobilized in order for the United Nations Volunteers, the White Helmets Commission and other participating Governments to build further upon the aforementioned successes. This will enable replication of these important experiences in other Member States.

18. The General Assembly may wish to reaffirm its support for the White Helmets initiative under resolutions 49/139 B, 52/171, 54/98 and 56/102, and to request the relevant Member States and the United Nations system to further strengthen and apply this modality to address the needs engendered by humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters. This is deemed particularly relevant within the scope of strengthening United Nations capacities to achieve the Millennium Development Goals through the involvement of volunteer services.

19. Taking into account the 10 years that have passed since the first United Nations resolution on the White Helmets initiative (49/139 B), the General Assembly may wish to consider inviting the Office of the Secretary-General to analyse the viability of the initiative's programmatic incorporation within the United Nations system, suggest appropriate mechanisms and areas, and inform the General Assembly at its sixtieth session of its findings.